

Vernacular Imagery on English Misericords: Framing Interpretation

Betsy L. Chunko

Throughout the later Middle Ages, carved liturgical chairs known as ‘misericords’ were installed in the choirs of monastic and collegiate establishments to provide basic comfort to priests, canons and monks during the Divine Office. Designed as acts of *misericordia*, or demonstrations of mercy, these chairs were equipped with projecting wooden ledges to support the sitter when in their upright position. The undersides depict an assortment of figural carvings, which could be displayed or concealed depending on the position of the seat. Though misericords were, once *in situ*, only seen by medieval clerics, they often treat secular subjects — in other words, scenes from daily life.

Among the collection of mid-fourteenth century misericords at Gloucester Cathedral, a particularly perplexing example features a man lying on the ground with his donkey in a moment of rest [Fig. 1]. The modern viewer, seeing the strange scene, is bound to ask: Why was this image made and displayed in a sacred space, and what kind of message was it intended to convey? To answer such questions, we must understand that this apparently secular scene would have led a medieval clerical viewer to make certain associations with the literature of his profession. For instance, the cleric could have read it as an image of a man ‘lying down’ with his donkey, embracing it as if in communion with a woman. Perhaps most pertinent to this understanding were doctrinal treatments of the sin of bestiality and other sexual practices considered reprehensible. The scene would have activated his knowledge of penitential texts designed to reproach the laity for a whole series of sexual deviations



Fig. 1. Misericord, Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucestershire, c. 1340.
Photo: Betsy Chunko; reproduced by kind permission of Bairbre Lloyd.

ranging from the general to the specific. Pierre Payer, in *Sex and the Penitentials*, explored the widespread use of penitential texts in the pastoral ministry.¹ He argued that treatment of aberrant sexual practices is evidence of “what the people were doing sexually.”² By appearing to undermine an aspect of religious doctrine, the misericord actually called clerical attention to standing religious proscriptions in order to reassert the strength of medieval religiosity. That is, the image can be read as a reflection of the Church’s interest in combating deviant sexual practices. Furthermore, by guiding clerical meditations through one kind of deviant sexual behaviour, the scene would have led the cleric to contemplate proscriptions against other tendencies considered aberrant by the medieval Church, such as homosexuality — initiating a metonymic chain of associations. Ultimately, the image served as a convenient reminder for broad cultural discourses on sin and penance surrounding sex and sexuality, activating a variety of religiously imbued interpretations.

The Gloucester scene is but one example of a misericord carving which suggests the threat of moral turpitude only to diffuse it. An image at Bristol Cathedral can be read as similarly mnemonic. It features a woman holding her husband by his beard as she simultaneously hurls bowls and other kitchen items at his head — one has just whizzed past and can be seen behind him, still airborne [Fig. 2]. He raises one hand to defend himself; in the other, he holds an empty platter. A picture of male frustration, the image inscribes female agency in the domestic realm. It would have called to the clerical viewer’s mind a range of treatments of women and marriage —



Fig. 2. Misericord, Bristol Cathedral, Gloucestershire, c. 1520.

Photo: Betsy Chunko; reproduced by kind permission of Dean Dr David Hoyle.

from, for example, the Bible, sermons and anti-feminine writings by the early Church Fathers. The image, by recalling such texts, would have reinforced his professional responsibility to educate the men and women in his own parish on the proper dimensions of medieval marriage. Moreover, because the scene depicts matrimony as a frustrating endeavour, it also reasserts the undesirability of marital comforts, encouraging his continued celibacy.

Recognising the co-representative potential of the image becomes possible when we approach medieval images as sites of specific yet multivalent possibility within a cultural milieu. To more fully understand such medieval media, we need to engage seeming absences as much as, if not more than, presences. W. J. T. Mitchell has argued on behalf of a “principle of counterinduction, of ignoring apparent, visible ‘facts.’”³ He asserts that even artists working in the tradition known as realism were as much concerned with the invisible as the visible. Misericords must be read through absent, oftentimes lost, discourses — both textual and oral. Examples like those at Gloucester and Bristol suggest multiple interpretive possibilities that harbour important but unobvious, obscured levels of meaning for a restricted, celibate, male viewership. Each image was ‘caused’ by, and owed its creation to, multiple ideological positionings common to both layman and cleric. For this reason, misericord studies present the specialist of late-medieval English art and cultural history with an opportunity to postulate an unacknowledged phenomenon of image theorisation on the part of artists/craftsmen and their clerical patrons.

Reclaiming a Vernacular Visual Mode

Delineating the religious potential behind seemingly secular misericord examples necessitates a process of ‘un-reading,’ of forgetting what we think we know about genre scenes. In his book *Confronting Images*, Georges Didi-Huberman insists that the art historian must allow for an alternative ‘dialectical moment’ which consists of not grasping the image, but of letting oneself be grasped by it instead.⁴ This process is invested in refuting seeming ‘self-evidences,’ of leaving behind “everything that we thought we saw because we knew what to call it.”⁵ While straightforward iconographic investigations of the image are bound to remain limited and, ultimately, contrived, a more ‘open’ interpretive schema can open up a vista into medieval daily life and the impulses and ideas that were central to the clergy’s participation in a vernacular shared culture.

The ‘worldly’ iconography of many remaining misericord examples functioned in an implicitly theoretical and theological fashion; in turns humorous, mnemonic, and moralising, it called to the clerical viewer’s mind issues at once religious and secular, public and private, while reinforcing the ideological position of the Church on lay matters. I would argue that this sort of secular/religious cultural interchange might be termed ‘vernacular visuality’ — i.e., a principle of visual induction, perhaps

unique to misericord creation and reception, based on cultural memes that would have been shared by elite and non-elite cultures. The term vernacular visuality is meant to imply a more nuanced approach to apparently secular imagery employed in sacred contexts. As a concept, it is indebted to Nicholas Watson and Bernard McGinn and their work on vernacular theology in the Middle Ages.⁶ It holds that misericords employed vernacular subjects — peasant folks at work and play — to bridge the divide between the estates of layman and cleric.

Furthermore, misericords demonstrate that, just as educated clerics profoundly influenced the character of the lay classes living in constant danger of descending into moral depravity, that lay class was a force in shaping the articulation of religious media designed both on their behalf and with them in mind. Aron Gurevich, in *Medieval Popular Culture*, argued for the primary importance of the mental frameworks that shaped cultural discourses; misericords evince such mental frameworks.⁷ They serve as artistic evidence for the body of ideas that both determined and reflected the intellectually available knowledge of their time. As objects commissioned by and for the Church, they reflect aspects of a shared culture — concerns common to peasant and priest. Their vignettes were not simply decorative or entertaining; instead, these functioned in a sophisticated fashion — reinforcing appropriate behaviour for those within and without the Church while illustrating the Church's perception of the layman's interests, moral shortcomings and spiritual limitations.

New 'Frameworks' for Image Interpretation

While investigation of medieval misericords must ultimately promote interpretive multivalence, useful frameworks for recovering their primary meanings can nonetheless be suggested. One such framework for understanding apparently secular misericord imagery might take issue with those scenes which seem to harbour 'didactic' or moralising potential. At issue here would be images of schoolmasters beating children, of men sleeping in front of hearths, of brawling, drinking, gambling peasants — all of which can be read in terms of the rhetoric of the ecclesiast. The language clerics employed in sermons to illustrate and reinforce religious proscriptions was often designed to summon vivid vignettes to mind in order to reinforce the Church's directives. Many misericord scenes can be interpreted as visualisations of such sermons intended to treat lay behaviour and instruct common folk on principles of doctrine. We can interpret such examples as a sort of rhetorical *compilatio* in the church fabric, referencing popular didacticisms central to the language of the laity. Thus, while certain figural scenes appear 'secular,' the presence of a clerical viewer activated another level of their meaning. They functioned as reminders of his professional responsibility to educate the masses against temptations to sin.



Fig. 3. Misericord, Sherborne Abbey, Dorsetshire; c. 1436-7.

Photo: Betsy Chunko; reproduced by kind permission of Canon Eric Woods.

Another framework through which misericords might be read is the ‘proscriptive’ — a term meant to suggest the various ways in which secular imagery dealt with issues of sexual politics. Proscriptive images could remind clerics of the sexual lives of the laypeople in their fold and the Church’s doctrine of sexual control. While husband-beating is in many ways part of an English literary phenomenon — evinced, for instance, in Chaucer’s translation of *La Vieille* from *Roman de la Rose* into the unapologetically sexual and violent Wife of Bath — its success as a theme was not limited to secular literature. The depiction of peasants on misericords is not incidental; the rural layman was frequently lambasted in art and literature as a figure of spiritual ineptitude. Scholars such as Paul Freedman have revealed the clergy’s belief in peasants’ particular incompetence in matters of romantic love.⁸ The penchant for scenes of domestic violence in the fabric of the medieval church allowed the cleric to successfully draw on the realities of peasant daily life in order to deal with matters of spiritual deviation believed to be common among the common man. Proscriptive images could also have reminded the medieval cleric of his personal responsibilities: abstinence and self-control. Thus, all at once, examples featuring scenes of domestic violence — particularly those which situate violence in the home — mirrored domestic strife among those in his fold, reflected doctrinal texts, and reminded him to personally shun women and remain in the more welcoming arms of the Church.

A third framework might be broadly construed as ‘cathartic,’ and would include scenes which acknowledge and support a cycle of displacement and, ultimately, stabilisation of the medieval centre — i.e. the axis of conservative religiosity.⁹ Jesters, acrobats, posture-masters and musicians were a fact of English daily life, a circumstance which drew the ire of William Langland, who wrote scathingly of “japers and jangelers, Judas chylderen” in *Piers Plowman*.¹⁰

This third group might also contain the grimacing faces that greet viewers of most major misericord collections [Fig. 3]. Often lewd and even offensive, the comic and grotesque signified merriment, but they also suggested a variety of medieval anxieties stemming from doctrines of sexual/social control and fear of the wrath of God. Confronting them allowed the medieval viewer to vanquish the very possibility of spiritual failure. The grimace, for instance, has been discussed by post-Freudian scholars such as Ernst Kris, who suggested its proximity, as a gesture or affectation in art, to psychosis.¹¹ Similarly, images displaying humour and chaos, Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' profaning of solemnities, brought forward larger cultural considerations to liberate and bolster the assumptions of the dominant conservative ideology.¹² This class of imagery suggests that the very strength of medieval religiosity both permitted and necessitated comical and grotesque visual signs.

Misericord scholars have assigned the survival of the vast majority of misericord examples to the apparent lack of religious meaning in their figural imagery; they accept that scenes of peasants at work and play affected no enmity toward changes in theology and doctrine. Accordingly, they argue that the gamut of English misericord vignettes survived the devastating effects of the sixteenth-century Dissolution and Reformation because such imagery operated outside of religious discourses. Yet this is a misconception based on shifting cultural conditions of viewership. The innocuous image is an anachronistic illusion; in their original socio-cultural viewing contexts, seemingly secular misericords operated as markers of larger religious concerns. They were produced in a culture deeply embedded in the rhetoric of sermonising and scriptural glossing; no subject, as irreverent as it might seem to us, operated outside of religious discourse.

The Cultural Conditions of Viewership

Michael Camille suggested that by the thirteenth century, certain visual signs demanded a literacy of their own.¹³ Similarly, vernacular misericord vignettes — the viewing of which was restricted to clerical, celibate males steeped in religious doctrine — were predicated upon a certain kind of specialised viewership. While examples featuring peasants appear to employ secular or irreverent subject matter, they actually appropriated aspects of lay culture in order to suggest religious discourses surrounding sins and sinful behaviour. In viewing these scenes, the cleric would have been reminded of the Church's typological treatment of the peasantry as low, sinful and liable to err. These images would have then activated further chains of meaning; the cleric would, in seeing an individual peasant depicted, have thought of his personal interactions within the community. The peasant's likeness, though often employed to represent negative typological associations, therefore suggested two kinds of subjectivity: that of the clerical viewer and that of the peasant(s) whose confession he had just heard.

For this reason, misericord analysis can reveal issues regarding the framing of self-knowledge in the Middle Ages. Caroline Walker Bynum has sought to treat the complicated issue of medieval subjecthood — its meaning as well as its point of emergence. She situates the origin of the modern conception of the ‘individual’ as early as the twelfth century and describes a uniquely medieval tension between an emerging theological understanding of the individual as an autonomous, spiritual agent, and an equally new pressure to define the individual by reference to membership of a collective.¹⁴ Bruce Holsinger and Rachel Fulton, in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, further Bynum’s discussion, arguing that environments are inseparable from the people who inhabit them.¹⁵ They argue that concepts like ‘individualism’ and ‘individual identity’ represent only one way of looking at personhood; medieval man also understood himself through membership in any of various collective organisations, professions, social categories, estates.

The study of the peasant ‘subject’ in misericord vignettes must recognise that individual images skirted individual and collective forms of self-knowledge. An image of a peasant was never merely a type meant to stand in for a faceless crowd — a seething, sinful mass. Clerical viewers would have approached images featuring unique figural subjects as markers for both specific persons and typological constructions. Notions of the real and the typological, of the individual and the collective, were co-mingled. The cultural conditions for viewing these objects necessitated that the vernacular image function as both one and many, as simultaneously faceless and familiar, representative of the self and community. In this way, misericords represent the subjective and objective experiences of the Word of God in the world, the joining of the divine message with the vulgar and the everyday.

Although misericords have often been called humble, low-status objects, this is to reduce their importance to just so many scraps of wood. While their different possible meanings are of value in and of themselves, few misericord scenes functioned solely within individual systems of meaning, such that the odd, humorous, violent or vulgar image was always simultaneously (and paradoxically) moralising, didactic, proscriptive and discursive. Contemporary viewers can reclaim part of the eclipsed viewing practices that structured misericord design and reception if we recognise these seats as ideological sites upon which peasant imagery and larger cultural concerns surrounding lay spirituality came together, convened and coexisted. Above all, the study of medieval misericords should be seen as an entry point into broader theorisations of medieval visuality and culture. As cultural artefacts, they undoubtedly co-represent multiple discourses, both sacred and profane. Studying them can therefore reveal aspects of medieval mentality to scholars from a variety of disciplines who would seek to understand how culture was experienced across social strata in the late-medieval world.

- 1 P. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
- 2 Ibid, 12.
- 3 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 39.
- 4 G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. J. Goodman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) 16.
- 5 Ibid, 16.
- 6 See B. McGinn, 'The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,' *Church History*, Vol. 65, No. 2, June 1996, 197-219; *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, Volume III—The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); N. Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409,' *Speculum*, Vol. 70, No. 4, October 1995, 822-864; N. Watson, 'Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,' in W. Scase, R. Copeland, and D. Lawton, eds., *New Medieval Literatures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); N. Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics,' in David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 539-565.
- 7 A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Perception and Belief*, trans. J. M. Bak and P. A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 8 P. Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 9 See M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 10 W. Langland, *Piers Plowman*, trans. E. Talbot Donaldson, eds. Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 1990) 2, line 35.
- 11 E. Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952).
- 12 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968); see also H. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911).
- 13 In this case, the 'text/picture alignment' M. Camille, 'Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,' *Art History*, Vol. 8, 1985, 42-43.
- 14 C. Walker Bynum, 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?' in Idem, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 86-90.
- 15 B. Holsinger and R. Fulton, eds., *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).